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SUBJECT Interview With General Vernon Walters

PETER KROUGH: He spoke for this man, and for this man. This President depended on him, as did this one.

He served six presidents in all, Republican and Democrat alike. At critical junctures in recent history, he worked with this leader, this leader, and this leader. The master of discretion, he successfully smuggled Henry Kissinger into Paris 15 times for secret negotiations with Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam.

To this day, he keeps a low public profile, yet continues to operate at the highest levels of global diplomacy. His name is Vernon Walters, and on this special edition of "American Interests" he talks about the crisis in Central America.

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Welcome to "American Interests." I'm Peter Krough.

Our guest is Vernon Walters, President Reagan's Ambassador-at-Large. Ambassador Walter's career in government spans four decades. He has served in the Army, in the Central Intelligence Agency, and most recently in the State Department, where he travels widely, meeting privately with world leaders.

Trouble in Central America has commanded much of Ambassador Walter's attention these past four years. His efforts are not publicly discussed, but State Department watchers keep a careful eye on his itinerary because they know

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that when Ambassador Walters travels diplomatic action is likely to follow.

[Film clip]

KROUGH: Vernon Walters began his service for the United States Government in 1941, when he enlisted in the Army. After the war, military attach Walters went to Rio de Janeiro as a translator for Secretary of State George Marshall and President Truman at the 1947 Conference of the Organization of American States.

Thus began a long career as interpreter for United States presidents.

The OAS Conference reconvened a year later, this time in Bogota, Colombia. As the Conference began, the streets of the city erupted in violence and bloody civil strife. But the conferees were determined to continue, and so was Walters. He performed his duties as an interpreter for Marshall, virtually under fire.

Walters later accompanied Ambassador Avarrell Harriman to to Iran in 1953 for consultation with the government of Prime Minister Mosadeq. Later, now as a Lieutenant Colonel, Vernon Walters served as an aide to President Eisenhower.

The new President traveled widely, and Walters, master of seven languages, was usually at his side.

In Rome, they met with Pope John XXIII, only the second meeting in history between a U.S. President and Pontiff.

In Paris, Walters translated as General DeGaulle extended a warm welcome to his old comrade in arms.

Travels with President Eisenhower were victory tours. But, in 1958, Walters accompanied Vice President Nixon on a trip to Latin America. Some nations received them well but, in Peru, Nixon and Walters got their first taste of anti-American demonstrations. And in Venezuela, angry crowds exploded in violence.

As Walters and Nixon sat in their car, angry Venezuelans hurled rocks. At the urging of Walters, Nixon continued his Latin American tour as planned.

Conflict of a different kind awaited the U.S. at the Big Four Conference in Paris, 1960. President Eisenhower and Vernon Walters listened as Premier Khrushchev denounced the U.S.

Vernon Walters continued to serve his presidents assigned as a military attach across Europe.

In 1969, President Nixon called on him for a highly sensitive mission. Walters was to smuggle Henry Kissinger into France for secret peace talks with the North Vietnamese. The President's confidence was rewarded. The meetings were not discovered until after they ended.

President Nixon transferred Walters, now a General, from Army duty to the Central Intelligence Agency in 1972. When President Ford took office, he promoted Walters to Deputy Director.

General Walters retired from active service in 1976.

Returning to government duty at President Reagan's request, Vernon Walters now serves as Ambassador-at-Large and trouble-shooter in Latin America, North Africa, Europe and elsewhere.

[End clip].

KROUGH: Ambassador Walters, in a recent speech, you described Central America not as our backyard, but as our front lawn. What -- what do you mean by that?

GENERAL VERNON WALTERS: Well, I think most people tend to take too close a view of Central America. Central America is part of the broad Soviet strategy of discrediting the United States as a reliable ally.

I believe their principal purpose is to drive a wedge between us and our European and Japanese allies, and the best way they see to do that is to show people that we are an unreliable ally. They point to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Shah, Haile Selassie, and so forth. And they say if now the United States cannot defend its small nearby neighbors a thousand miles from American borders, it is not going to defend you Europeans or you Japanese. And isn't it time, if that is true, to accommodate with the Soviet Union?

It is not just a question of Cuban influence in the Caribbean Basin or possible bases. The whole strategy is designed to discredit the United States and separate it from its allies.

KROUGH: By describing it as our front lawn, you suggest that very vital interests are at stake in that region. What -- what vital interests specifically do you point to?

GENERAL WALTERS: The one I just described. It's not economic. I believe it's something like .05 of our trade. It is not that, nor do we derive any particular income or revenue from the area.

It is the fact that the vital interests -- if it can be proved that we cannot defend Central America -- why should the Europeans and Japanese think that we can defend them? And what is significant about that is that at the end of the war, when we started our economic aid program, those countries' GNP was maybe 10 percent of ours. Today, the Gross National Product of the countries comprising the European Common Market is already larger than ours.

If they accommodate and the Soviets obtain some sort of control over the enormous pool of skilled labor in Europe, the enormous industrial plant, the whole equation of power in the world will be upset.

KROUGH: How are the Soviets pursuing in invisible ways, in concrete ways, the discrediting of our credibility with our nearest neighbors? How are they mounting their threat?

GENERAL WALTERS: They don't have to -- the world is watching. They don't have to do a great deal. The world watched Vietnam. And the only reason why hostages were taken in -- in Tehran was that we had bugged out of Vietnam.

You will notice that nobody takes Soviet hostages. Nobody attacks Soviet embassies. They know something very unpleasant would happen. So it doesn't happen. And that contrast is fairly evident. They point to the respect with which their diplomatic premises are treated as to the way ours are treated. And these are very subtle. They're doing this very skillfully. It's being done very subtle, and they don't have to do much.

The Europeans reasoned this out for themselves. At the risk of taking up some of your time, I was in the room when the U-2 Conference was held after our spy plane was shot down.

DeGaulle was presiding over the conference, Khrushchev at the end in a flurry got up, slammed the door and went out. DeGaulle went to Eisenhower and said, I don't know what he's going to do or what's going to happen, but whatever he does we're with you to the end.

Six years later, I came back to France as military attaché to a France which had withdrawn from the military structure of NATO, which had taken considerable distance from

us, which had asked us to evacuate the line of supply across France and the bases we had there. And I tried to find out what had brought us from the declaration of unconditional support in 1960 to this rather different situation in 1967, and I came to the conclusion that when President Kennedy sent Dean Acheson to see DeGaulle with the pictures of the Cuban missiles, DeGalle, unlike other leaders, did not say this is the end of the world. He said take them out.

When we did not take them out, he said, "If they're not going to fight for Cuba 90 miles from the United States, why should I believe they're going to fight for France 3,500 miles away. I've got to develop my own nuclear capability."

And the real danger of the success of this business in Central America is that if people lose faith in the American guarantee that they'll be protected by the United States, they will do one of two things. They will accommodate the Soviet Union, or they will develop their own nuclear capability. And who wants to live in a world with 30 nuclear powers? That's what's at stake in Central America, and that's why it's vital.

KROUGH: You have said that Central America is under attack by outside forces. What are these outside forces? It is something more than a wish in the Kremlin that we would be discredited in Central America. They are doing something, are they not?

GENERAL WALTERS: Oh, indeed they are. I don't know what the daily figures are. They vary at various times. I would say they have 5,000 people either from Cuba, Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union in Nicaragua, which in a country of two million people is a pretty healthy injection of people.

There is in Cuba a Soviet brigade. There is all kinds of intelligence being given to the Sandinistas and to the Cubans by the Soviets. In fact, in Cuba, the Soviets have the largest electronic intelligence installation in the world outside the Soviet Union.

So, these are some of the advantages they derive, the corollary advantages, the ancillary advantages to the major one of discrediting the United States and showing not just to the peoples of Central America but of South America that relying on the United States is useless.

And, of course, there is a certain unwillingness to see both sides of the question. The death squads are always on the right, never on the left. D'Aubison himself was shot through the neck in two elections ago. His number two man was killed in this election.

In Peru right now there are several hundred Soviet military advisers, of whom no one says anything. But our 55 in El Salvador is the subject of continuous comment. There's a disproportion in the consideration of the thing which plays into their hands without their having to do anything. The world is watching, and they know it.

KROUGH: What do you think explains, if it is true, this predisposition to find fault with our side but -- but not with theirs?

GENERAL WALTERS: I don't know, except that we Americans have a tradition that all other people regard us as being obsessed with guilt, and we did have it at the end of the war. Everybody else -- the Russians had suffered tens of millions of casualties. Their cities were in ruins. The Europeans had been occupied or destroyed. We were intact, relative to them. We had very few losses. We had developed the atomic bomb. We used it on people of another race, and we were ripe for guilt. And I think this is the thing that gave them courage in the dark days for them of '45 and '46, the knowledge that we had this guilt complex.

You know, General DeGaulle once said the guilt sense of the Americans doesn't prevent them from sinning. It just prevents them from enjoying their sins, and that's quite correct.

We always tend to -- whether there's an earthquake or a tidal wave -- I'm exaggerating for the purposes of illustration to say, "you think the CIA did that?" "No, I think it was the Department of Defense."

We just -- if we had that kind of clout, we wouldn't be in the situation we're in.

KROUGH: In addition to our -- our sense of guilt, which may make us more critical of our own actions than those even of our adversaries from time to time, clearly, Cuba is -- is part of the problem here. How much a part of the problem is -- is Cuba?

GENERAL WALTERS: Oh, I think very much a part of the problem because Cuba gives Communism in the Americas an acceptable Latin face. I mean, Russian Communism is so alien there's no possibility of it being [word unintelligible]. It also appeals to the Latin sense of the little guy standing up to the big guy, and so forth and so on. Part of our problem is we realize we're the big guy.

But, as for the guilt feeling, I wonder if there's any

other nation in history that's ever financed its competitors back into competition with us.

I was there when we put machine tools in the roofless factory at Wolfsburg where Volkswagens were made. We didn't just do it there. We did it in Japan. We did it in England. We did it in France, and we did it in Italy.

KROUGH: Do you think we also ought to be willing to do it in Cuba? That is to come to some arrangement with Castro, which involves his ceasing and desisting from revolutionary activities in Central America in exchange for some sort of a hopeful economic relationship with this country? Is that the makings of....

GENERAL WALTERS: No, that again moves toward economic determinism which, as you know, I do not espouse.

The Soviet Union gives Castro between four and six billion dollars a year, and I just don't think there's any way the American taxpayers are going to give Castro four to six billion dollars. I don't think there's any way the Russian taxpayers would, if they had anything to say about it, but they don't.

Castro is the leader of a country of nine million people -- maybe ten -- but he's got extraordinary world prominence by doing what he's done. And he's killed enough people that I just don't see how he could liberate his regime, how he could liberalize his regime and survive.

KROUGH: Does this mean there is no basis for making a deal with him?

GENERAL WALTERS: I -- I talked to him at length, and I don't think there is anything that will make him give up his revolutionary activities in the Caribbean Basin. I think he thinks that's part of his heaven-sent mission. I think he thinks it's his duty. I think he thinks it's his duty to the unliberated people of the world.

As I say, he's a true believer.

KROUGH: Does this mean that we wait around for Castro to be replaced before there is any prospect for an improvement in our relations with Cuba?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, you know, there are a lot of situations that we can't control, and I think that this is probably one of them. If you didn't have the nuclear weapon, it might be different, but the alternatives to the use of this,

are such that it would be very difficult. The British and French, fearing poison gas, were very reluctant to do anything about Hitler while he reoccupied the Rhineland, took the Czar, took Austria, took Czechoslovakia, because they feared there would be gas attacks and thousands of people would die. And now, there's almost a certainty of that.

KROUGH: What do you believe set Castro off on a course which has been so confrontational with the United States and so productive of threats to our interests in the Caribbean and Central America?

GENERAL WALTERS: First, I think his intellectual conviction as a Communist that our system is the antithesis of theirs, and the proof that there is a good life for the working people under another system, which is an outrageous contradiction, the principles of Marxism which, after all, was directed at a Dicken's type society which doesn't any longer exist. But they are so conservative that they don't recognize that the world has changed that much.

And I think he enjoys the center of the stage activity which his kind of behavior and conduct gives him.

KROUGH: I know you don't like to speak of economic determinism, but isn't it true that -- that socialism has been rather unrewarding for those leaders in charge of socialist systems? And isn't it possible that Castro might see economic benefits for his country and some closer relationship with this economy which -- for which he may have to pay some prices in restraining himself internationally?

GENERAL WALTERS: I think that's why the Soviet brigade is in Cuba -- make sure there are no surprises.

KROUGH: Fidel Castro or any other foreign leader which suffices as an example may understand our political system. He may be impressed with your knowledge of history and your fluency in foreign languages, but isn't his behavior and his decisionmaking ultimately going to be controlled by his own domestic political system and by his own ideology?

GENERAL WALTERS: I would say more by his ideology. He makes his political system there by his ideology, and he is a true believer.

KROUGH: You've said that he's maybe more of a true believer in Marxism than some of the top leaders in the Soviet Union.

GENERAL WALTERS: Sure. That's right. They've lived with it for 60 years. He's only lived with it for 25.

You know, when you look at history and you see that the Russian empire was the largest exporter of wheat and cereals in the world in 1913, and after 67 years of bad weather and bad harvests, it is now the largest importer of grains and cereals in the world, you begin to wonder how the system works.

Fidel Castro has not had that experience long enough. He is a true believer. He thinks -- he said to me -- he said, I wasn't pushed by you into the arms of the Communist. He said a careful study of history, economics and sociology convinced me that Marxism-Lenninism offered the only answer.

I said, but has it ever struck you that it's irreversible?

He said, No, everything is reversible. I'm reversible. I said, when are you reversible, Mr. President? He said, when the people no longer love me. I said, Mr. President, when that time comes who do you expect to have the courage to break the news to you? And even he laughed.

KROUGH: We are opposing a revolution in -- in Nicaragua which suggests that perhaps it is the requirement of this country to oppose revolutions when they develop particularly close at home. Is this -- is this something that is inevitable for us to oppose revolution in neighboring countries?

GENERAL WALTERS: I think it's nonsense. We don't. We co-sponsored the resolution in the Organization of American States calling for the overthrow of the Samoza regime. We don't oppose revolutions.

There are three great myths about American foreign policy in Central America.

The first is that the United States regards all movements against oppression and injustice, poverty and hunger as Communist plots hatched in Moscow. We don't. Not until they tell us so.

On the sixth of June, 1960, Fidel Castro said I became a Communist at the age of 17. I am one and will be one until the day I die. That's about as explicit as you can get.

Last year, Umberto Ortega said Marxism-Lenninism is the guide Sandinismo. Without Marxism-Lenninism there is no Sandinismo. That's about as clear as you can get.

In El Salvador, the Farabundo Marti is the name for the guerrillas. Who was Farabundo Marti? He was the founder of the Salvadorian Communist Party. He fled El Salvador and he went to Nicaragua where he worked for Sandino until Sandino discovered he was a Communist and threw him out of Nicaragua.

Now, when these people tell us who they are, we're very imprudent not to believe them. We didn't believe Adolf Hitler and we paid a terrible price for it.

The second great myth is that the United States, because it opposes these Marxist-Lenninist regimes, support the right wing regimes, the right wing dictatorships.

The United States sold no arms to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Guatemala and El Salvador until the last days of Jimmy Carter, in the case of El Salvador. There isn't another European country who can say the same thing.

When we do ordinary business with Czechoslovakia or Romania, no one says look at the United States shoring up those Communist dictatorships. But if we do business with Pinochet or Marcos, everybody says there are the Americans supporting their right wing friends.

And the third myth, and maybe the most sinister of all, is that the United States, by its implacable hostility, has pushed what were once true liberation movements into the arms of the Communists. You know that the Sandinista National Anthem calls the United States the enemy of all mankind.

In the case of the three of them, and Castro -- when Castro came to power, the American Ambassador told the Cuban armed forces we would no longer supply arms to defend Batista, he came to the United States. I took him to see Vice President Nixon, Secretary of State Herter, and up on the Hill to see the appropriate committees.

KROUGH: He had a ticker-tape parade.

GENERAL WALTERS: He had a ticker-tape parade...

KROUGH: Down Fifth Avenue.

GENERAL WALTERS: ...down Fifth Avenue. He then went to Harvard and addressed the student body. Now, if that's implacable hatred, I don't understand.

In the case of the Sandinistas, both Robello and Ortega were received at the White House by President Carter. In the first three years, we gave Nicaragua \$113 million. This

is for a country of two million people, mind you -- \$113 million. In the subsequent period, we've made available to Nicaragua a total of \$258 million, twice as much as we gave Samozza in the 17 years of his rule.

The Nicaraguans right now are selling 90 percent of their bananas to the United States, I think 60 percent more than they did before the revolution. Now, if that's implacable hatred, I don't understand the meaning of words. And yet these myths are widely believed and, unfortunately, widely used within the United States for political purposes.

KROUGH: People who are concerned about our efforts to -- to counter or at least contain the Nicaraguan revolution and are concerned that we risk another Vietnam, that we risk getting mired down in -- into a situation that ultimately we -- we cannot really affect....

[Confusions of voices].

GENERAL WALTERS: ...the Vietnam situation when we drag down Germany with one hand and Japan with the other. It's nonsense. We could have if we had the resolution, and the decision, and the consensus to do it. We did not have that, unfortunately.

I would simply point out that in Vietnam what we were trying to do was help a small people retain the limited -- yes, there were limited freedoms, but they were infinitely greater than what they have now. There were 20 daily newspapers in Saigon. There's only one now. That's not progress in the field of freedom of the press.

KROUGH: And there's one in Nicaragua, I gather.

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, there's one in Nicaragua, but it gets suppressed all the time -- La Princep.

The other important thing, I think, is that one of the features of these leftist regimes, these Communist regimes, not leftist, Communist regimes, is the flood of refugees.

In Hungary, we had 400,000. From Cuba, we had 800,000, winning for Cuba the title of the largest country in the world. The administration's in Havana, the government's in Moscow, the army's in Africa and the population is in Florida.

In Vietnam, when American bombs were falling everywhere, there was fighting in every village and all the young men were drafted into the South Vietnamese Army, there were no boat people. Since the Northerners took over, two

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million people have put out to the South China Sea in open boats and, as far as we can tell, 200,000 of them were lost at sea.

Now, that may be an improvement on Thieu government. That's what we were trying to save the Vietnamese people from, and because we did not have the will, we were not able to do it for them.

KROUGH: But, bascially, you do not see a Vietnam type trap for us in Central America?

GENERAL WALTERS: No.

KROUGH: Do you see the possibility of -- of our involvement there leading there, essentially, to a wider war?

GENERAL WALTERS: No, I don't see any possibility of our use of force -- direct use of American forces there unless there is intervention from the outside.

KROUGH: Do you basically believe, as you cast your eye around the globe, in Southeast Asia and in Central America -- do you basically believe in the domino theory? Well, as one country goes Communist, it neighbor goes, too?

GENERAL WALTERS: It's been proved. It's been proved. Vietnam fell. Cambodia fell. Laos fell. Three dominos roled up.

KROUGH: How is it likely to work in Central America if it's not....

GENERAL WALTERS: It's not going to work in Central America.

KROUGH: But, if it's not stemmed in Nicaragua, what is the scenario?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, I would say the scenario would be to move north. If I were a Soviet -- let me put it this way: if I were a Soviet planner, the dream of my life would be to destabilize Mexico. If Mexico were destabilized, the United States would be so concerned with this they would have very little time to waste on Europe, Asia or Africa. So, if I were a Soviet planner, I would move north to Guatemala, which has oil. As you know, two of these states, Mexican states, were once Guatemalan, and you then start a movement going and you try and destabilize Mexico. But I think the Mexicans are very much putting their house in order. I think they have a real understanding -- although they will not admit it publicly -- of

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the true nature and the threat in Central America.

KROUGH: But this is an interesting thing. The -- the Mexicans do not seem to admit it publicly. In fact, we seem to be more concerned about their security than they are. Why?

GENERAL WALTERS: Because I -- I would guess that they, you know, that it would be very difficult for us to standby and watch the Communists takeover a sweep up to the United States.

Also, I think probably, genuinely they don't think they have the same contrasts of poverty and wealth that exist in Central America, because I'm not sure this is true. I think, certainly, the poverty is as great, and I think that sometimes there are larger fortunes in Mexico than there are in very small countries in Central America.

But I think that Mexico is a strong and cohesive state. It's much harder to subvert a state the size of Mexico with nearly 70 million people, and they have a very strong nationalistic feeling.

They do not have large armed forces. I mean, they have very small armed forces, and I think they don't feel threatened yet, but I think that if the other Central American countries were to fall they would then realize that the threat was at their door.

KROUGH: This seems to be a situation in which the United States has decided to, in its own light, come to the rescue. Why haven't we been able to make better use of multilateral machinery in this area? Is it -- is it just too weak to be relied upon?

GENERAL WALTERS: Well, I think Ambassador Kirkpatrick said that in the United Nations, for instance, they vote against it 73 percent of the time.

You know, you can vote against the United States and nothing bad happens. If you vote against the Soviet Union there's some sort of retaliation. But there's none from the United States which accepts the fact that people differ with it. That's the difference between a totalitarian view of the world and a democratic view of the world.

KROUGH: What would you describe as our ultimate objective in Central America? What do we want to see there?

GENERAL WALTERS: We want to see pluralistic democracies. If they want to have a socialist government,

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that's their business. If they want to have a mixed economy, that's their business. If they want to have a capitalistic economy, that's their business.

We just look at history and we see that, basically, democracies do not attack their neighbors and, basically, dictatorships; whether they be right or left, are almost invariably tempted by military adventures abroad.

We feel one of the greatest guarantees of peace is the existence of pluralistic democracies, not just in Central America, but anywhere.

KROUGH: Thank you Ambassador Walters.

For "American Interests," I'm Peter Krough.